

**Immortality:** *I don't want to achieve immortality through my work; I want to achieve immortality through not dying.*  
—Woody Allen, American actor, writer, filmmaker

## Opinion

# De-fanging the Ides of March

Lately, I get the feeling from young people I meet that beyond computer skills and consumer skills they don't know all that much. This may be the grouching of a middle-aged man, but these same young people don't seem to have much curiosity, and I'm not at all sure that they even know how to learn new things very easily. I also don't see development of manual—meaning “by hand”—skills taking place. I want to be wrong in my assumptions, but it makes me wonder if that, perhaps, the alarming trend towards violence in our society is somehow related to this.

Not many years ago, Hawaii was a safe, friendly place where, even in the big city, people didn't lock their doors when they left the house and you could always count on interesting group conversations at bus stops. At the same time, the warm-weather state of Hawaii led the nation in knitting-yarn sales, not because everyone was making sweaters, but because yarn was essential for a variety of crafts. You couldn't take one step without seeing a “Primo” beer-can hat, they were everywhere. Hmm, maybe some trends are better left unrevived.

On the other hand, I feel that people who are secure in their ability to do, or make, constructive things are less inclined to resent other people and are less inclined to strike out at each other.

So, at that time, skills of all kinds were handed down from generation to generation so that virtually every youngster was expert, or becoming expert, in a wide range of activities from reading the ocean and fishing, to crafts of all kinds, to making music come out of an instrument rather than a box.

Related to this, perhaps in an obscure way, is that at this time of year the saying “Beware the Ides of March” surfaces. For any of us with the slightest awareness of classical literature, or history, or both, the term vibrates (or, I should say, trembles) with the terror that seems to come with knowing the future—

surely, nothing good is worth knowing about in advance. And, surely, enough dread accompanies the annual income tax filing deadline that perhaps the saying should be changed to “Beware the Ides of April.” That has far more meaning today, particularly if one doesn't like the way tax dollars are spent.

In Galus Julius Caesar's time, the full Roman Senate convened on the *calends* (beginning of each month), on the *nones* (the ninth day before the ides), and on the *ides* (dividing point), which in March falls on the 15th. It was a dangerous time for Caesar because his enemies would be assembled.

“A soothsayer bids you beware the ides of March,”

cautioned William Shakespeare in his play *Julius Caesar*. He could have said “beware the *nones*...,” but historical accuracy requires the murder take place during the mid-month assembly.

Today, we no longer follow the Julian calendar. Since 1582 the Gregorian calendar determines how we divide our years and months.

But, I'm off the subject. Hawaii seasons are so balmy that violence should not even be possible under these conditions. Shakespeare's prediction to Caesar serves as a somewhat brutal reminder that man's inhumanity to man has not only been taking place throughout history, but that there is still evidence of it

right outside our own doors, every day.

Even in an idyllic region of the earth, such as Hawaii, human danger does not escape us. It seems to be present mostly on the highways, but is increasingly evident in neighborhoods where folks have long been known for their tolerance and, even, hospitality to one another. Take a look at the number of houses with bars across the windows. Consider the number of assaults, beatings, cases of child abuse, domestic abuse and murders that are reported daily. Random acts of kindness have been replaced by random acts of violence.

Things seem to go in cycles. I feel very ready for springtime, both seasonally and in this society in

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**Just Thinking**  
by Alexander Kufel



**Beauty:** *When I am working on a problem I never think about beauty... only how to solve the problem. But when I have finished, if the solution is not beautiful, I know it is wrong.*—**Richard Buckminster Fuller, American architect, 1895-1983**

## Army values...

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become bunglers but rather as a differentiation between ethical watchword and development objective. Lack of competence may stem from lack of training, inexperience, or even the sudden appearance of an unanticipated and overwhelming task. In any event, we have a duty obligation to do our best. Over the long run we seek to improve our personal competence just as we strive to improve the efficiency and the effectiveness of the organization: important goals, but not moral imperatives.

Otherwise the list is much as before, maybe a little briefer and perhaps easier to remember, but no less important. For centuries armies used the threat of force to control the many on behalf of the few. The ethical values of the U.S. Army guarantee that its military power legitimately serves our constitutional democracy. Over two hundred years of subservience to civilian authority is the United States military's proudest achievement.

Ethical behavior is similarly essential to the success of the Corps of Engineers. We manage large amounts of money and directly affect the lives and welfare of the public through disaster response and regulatory programs, just to name two. Most of the time our customers are delighted by our selfless service, integrity and moral courage, and even when our ethical behavior doesn't serve their short-term

goals, in the long run they respect us for saying no.

I won't pretend that adhering to these ethical values will always be easy. The temptation to divert resources seems to rise as the dollar amount at stake declines: "No one will mind my making a few long-distance calls" or "It's harmless for me to share some project information with my cousin" or even, "If I don't use those frequent-flier miles they'll simply be lost." But, little transgressions weaken our resistance to big ones. It's easier to hide an unpleasant truth behind a convenient lie to a superior or subordinate or to blame the contractor when we made the error, but such dishonesty destroys the trust that binds our teams and partnerships. Supervisors may be tempted to win the loyalty of employees through preferential treatment or coerce it through threat of retaliation, neither of which treats them with respect, nor earns their respect, for that matter.

Nor do I claim that ethical questions are always clear-cut. For example, the issue of how precisely employees should bill their hours is vexing, although we are working to clarify it. The bottom line is that no Corps employee should feel required to cheat in order to get the job done. I have never felt that the Army expected me to compromise ethical values, and I intend that no member of Honolulu District should either.

The example of General Lee shows that values do shift over time, and the Army leadership has recently adjusted our ethical bearings. We should examine them to ensure that we understand what is expected and assess our behavior to ensure that we can continue to be proud of it.

## Ides of March...

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which I live. I want to go to bed at night, again, without locking my doors. I want to walk down the street unhassled. I want to talk freely to strangers without questioning their motives.

Thus, my solution to a society that is a breeding ground for fear is to turn things around by directing energy into positive outcomes. It may be overly simplistic, but I would take those tax dollars that I dread to part with and direct more of them to the schools. I would empower the schools not only to teach how to know things, but how to do things. I would provide enough economic support to expand existing programs and reinstate in-school and after-school lessons beyond the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. The goal being to see certain activities become a way

of life again: ukulele lessons, piano lessons, language school, art lessons, crafts lessons, shopclasses, sports programs of the most informal kind.

It's the young I would put my money on. When older folks see how much fun it is, they won't be far behind. Ah, learning to do things well is such sweet suffering! It's my feeling that preventing a youngster from giving up in the face of such discomfort, however cruel it may seem at the time, is far less destructive than denying them skills. Because, knowing how to do something, just one thing, is a building block for personal strength and spiritual strength that can never be taken away.

Then, come April 15, I'll have an incentive to pay my share of taxes without whimpering, secure in the knowledge that idle youth are thus by choice, and not because they don't know how to do anything constructive. And, Shakespeare's words can fade away as a reference to a time and place found only in books.